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ABSTRACT

Nine commonly given objections to the principles and practices of individualized reading are answered by the author. There are forces within the schools today, the author says, who are working toward a change in the conventional reading program: students bored with routine and disinterested in the reading materials and teachers faced with teaching children whose ranges of reading ability vary several levels in a single class. At the same time other forces who have such objections as the nine listed and disputed by the author fight to maintain the status quo. The author speaks out in favor of individualized reading programs. (NH)

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THE CASE FOR INDIVIDUALIZED READING

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Student and teacher dissatisfaction with conventional reading programs has led to a growing interest in individualized reading. This interest is reflected in the pre-packaged, multi-level reading materials now available, the professional literature and educational arrangements that encourage children to read material commensurate with their abilities.

For many years special interests have strongly influenced the pattern whereby reading is taught in American schools. Textbook publishers and traditional teacher education programs have tended to encourage prescriptive reading arrangements. Even though materials have been improved and teacher education programs have become more thorough, teachers generally depend upon lesson plans outlined in manuals to guide their day-to-day reading activities.

It is not surprising that a single textbook orientation is so prevalent. After all, it follows the pattern the teachers knew when they were students, it is modeled on the grouping procedures learned in the college classroom and reflects the procedures reinforced during the practice or intern teaching experiences.

There are strong forces working to change the situation. One force is student rebellion at reading material that has little personal appeal or seems inopportune. They often reject the routine of following the dictates of teachers who monotonously present "new words," introduce every story children read, determine the amount and time required to read and then follow the activity with all questions emanating from the teacher rather than from the students. Children who fail to adjust to the process often associate reading with unpleasant tasks. For some, reading ceases to be a pleasure or a function that satisfied curiosity or a personal need.

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Teachers faced with teaching children whose ranges of reading ability vary several levels in a single class are realizing the absurdity of using a single text to fit the needs of all their students. The situation is magnified by the variety of interests reflected in the experiences and book preferences of children when they're given an opportunity to read things they choose to read.

It is tragic that many teachers who wish to exchange a static, ability grouped, single text, prescriptive reading program for the flexibility of individualized reading are frequently obstructed by forces that work to maintain the status quo. There is little wonder that reading ills are so commonplace in American schools. As long as directors of reading or any authoritative figure can describe a school-wide reading program that is geared to a single text or "reading package," the pathos of children struggling with "grade level" books will continue to be commonplace.

The reluctance of teachers to move toward greater individualization may stem from hearsay which leads some to presume:

(1) Individualized reading is so complex and demanding only exceptional teachers are able to master the approach.

(2) The materials necessary to follow an individualized reading program must be voluminous and it is impossible in most situations to get enough books.

(3) Such a program is so "laissez-faire" that the basic reading skills may be overlooked or missed.

(4) Children do not have the ability or maturity to select their own reading materials.

(5) It is difficult to define reading programs that use so many different books.

(6) Children accustomed to reading in small ability groups cannot understand a reading program without direction

to take turns reading orally from the same text which others are supposed to follow.

(7) It takes too much time to have an individual conference with each child.

(8) Record keeping is complicated.

(9) There's little research to support the values of individualized reading.

Overcoming the impediments to good individualization should be no more complicated than removing the obstacles that seem indigenous to any good design for teaching reading. Change to a functional individualized approach is more difficult when responsible persons credit premises that preclude the unqualified acceptance of self-seeking, self-selection and self-pacing as a legitimate foundation for building good readers and good reading habits. It seems worthwhile at this point to respond to the common objections to the principles and practices of individualized reading as listed above.

(1) Because creative teachers are usually the ones who first accept innovation and change in routine, many have associated successful individualized reading programs with the brighter and more daring personalities. Of course, this kind of teacher is the one who operated any reading design better than most. He is the one who had the most exciting basal program and will continue to direct the most efficient individualized situation. Any design for teaching reading is complex if it has the characteristics that are essential to maximum learning.

(2) All good reading teachers demand and need a wide variety of materials to read. Unfortunately some arrangements for teaching reading plod along with

multiple copies of a single book geared to the single class adoption. More copies of the same book in a room does not increase the available amount of reading material. Obviously, two copies of different books doubles the exposure over two copies of the same book. In addition to increasing exposure to reading material, variety permits the selection of literature in terms of interests and reading levels.

(3) One of the ultimate goals of any reading program is to develop independent readers. This can hardly be accomplished in situations where the learners are seldom given a chance to make decisions about their personal reading needs. The learner is best qualified to know what is interesting, what is difficult and what is too easy. The classroom that gives status to the learner and respects his ability to operate individually permits the teacher time to access personal reading skills. This stands in contrast with situations where skills are mass taught "over the heads" of some, under others, and indifferently to many.

(4) It is true that many children select inappropriate materials for reading when left alone to do this job. It is also true that materials teachers select are often inappropriate for the learner. Children who make improper choices do not improve when denied the opportunity to practice what they need to do. When improper selections are made, the teacher should provide help without denying an opportunity for free selection later. After all, poor drivers do not improve by being denied the right to drive.

(5) There is always a range of abilities in any group. because of this, it has never been realistic to describe a reading program in terms of the limitations established by a class text adoption. Functional goals have a place in any reading program, but individualized reading places the emphasis upon personal needs rather than group performances. How the goals of reading are met should constitute the nature and definition of the plan for teaching reading.

(6) Individualized reading is not without grouping. It's the nature of grouping that changes. Whereas in most conventional situations ability constitutes the primary factor in arranging small groups, individualized reading emphasizes other criteria which are less likely to stigmatize and destroy the learners self-concept. Most arrangements for reading function better when those involved understand the purposes of the activities. When groups meet based upon such variables as subject content, interest, friendships, research needs, or ability, they are less likely to assume reading must be a standardized procedure with a teacher serving as a taskmaster.

(7) Conferences do take time, but they serve an important function. They tell the child the teacher is concerned with him individually and proves it by giving him an occasional private audience. The notion that the world stops and learning ceases for those not under direct teacher supervision is as absurd with individualized reading as with traditional plans.

(8) The good reading teacher keeps records to help her teach diagnostically. Fortunately, the task for the individualized reading teacher is easier because the pupils are involved in keeping some of the records. Other records of reading needs are recorded by the teacher during individual conferences.

(9) There is little research that is definitive enough to isolate any reading situation as absolutely superior to another. The variables are too nebulous to control and the instructors are too. Bright people will always get the best results with youngsters learning to read in the long haul. There is some research, however, that neutralizes many of the criticisms of individualized reading. Irene Vite's article, "Individualized Reading -- The Scoreboard on Control Studies," is one that reports such findings. Her article was published in Education, January, 1961. W. E. Dolch's articles in the December, 1961, and January, 1962, Elementary English also establish a good rationale for incorporating the principles of individualized reading into a good reading program. There have been other articles defending individualized reading since and some that are critical. This is to be expected.